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ABSTRACT

In Fall 1995, the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) established the Fathers and Families Roundtable Series, designed to examine and address critical research, practice, and policy issues embedded in NCOFF's "core learnings" about fatherhood and in work on fathers and families. Each of the first seven roundtables focused on a different core learning; the sessions brought together researchers from a variety of disciplines, along with practitioners and policymakers, in small, focused forums designed to stimulate analysis. This report is a synthesis of major themes that cut across the seven meetings, with particular focus on their implications for practice, research, and policy. The themes discussed in the report are: (1) Fathers Can Play Many Roles in Their Children's Lives; (2) Numerous Factors Determine Fathers' Roles; (3) There Are No Clear Answers to the Question, "How Do Fathers Matter?"; (4) One Size Doesn't Fit All; and (5) Practice Should Inform Research, and Research Should Inform Practice. The report also summarizes participants' recommendations for new directions for research, practice, and policy. (EV)

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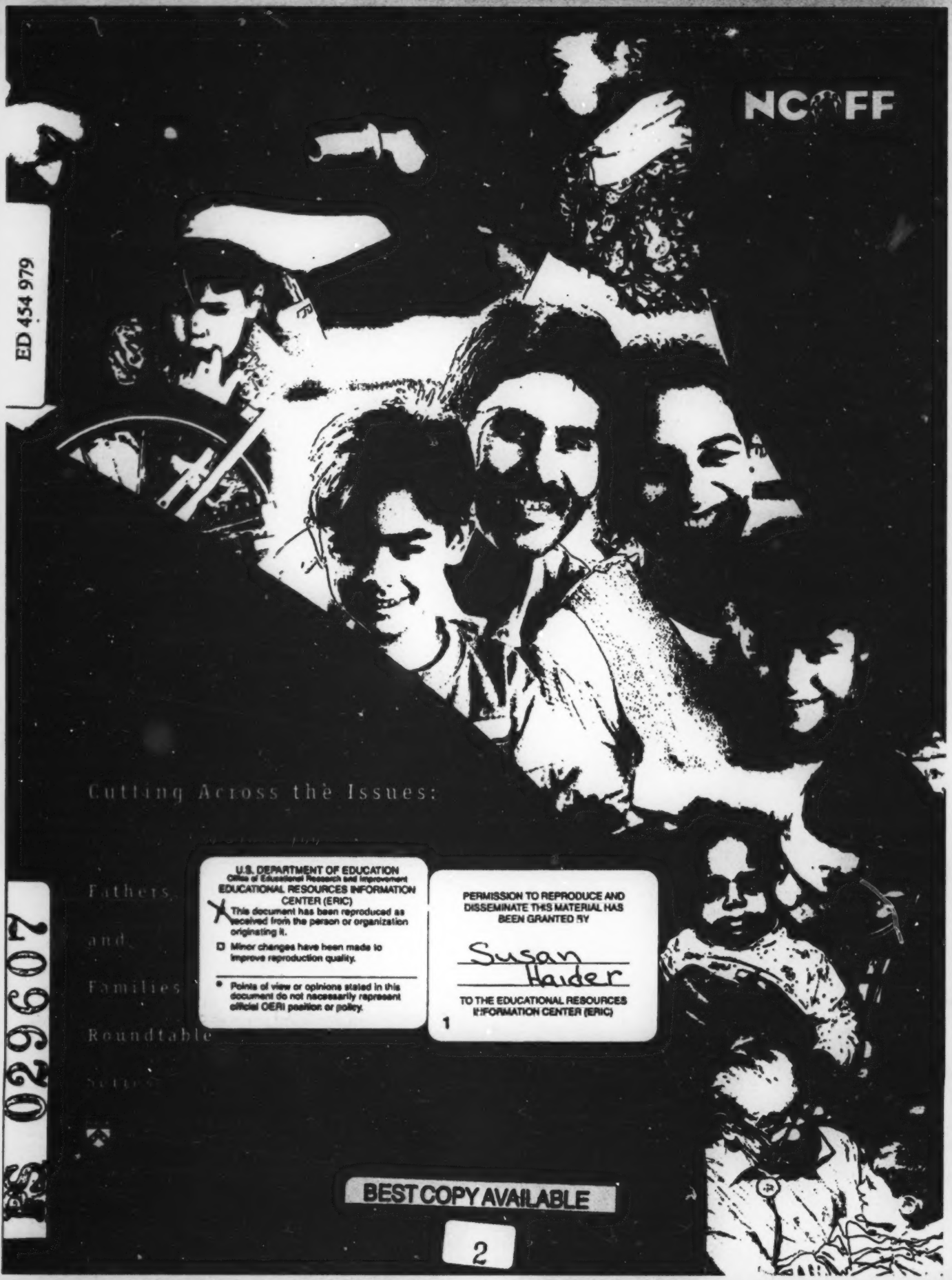

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Cutting Across the Issues:

Fathers and Families Roundtable Series

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This document was developed by staff at the National Center on Fathers and Families (Vivian Gadsden, Keisha Arnwine, Bill Crawford, and Danielle Kane) in collaboration with Leila Feiner, Elizabeth Swift, and Amy Hightower of Policy Studies Associates, which was contracted to record the activities of each roundtable and compile the report. We would like to express our gratitude to the roundtable participants – researchers, practitioners, policymakers, social commentators, and funders – who unselfishly shared their knowledge, insights, and suggestions about the roundtables and the Center's work.

We are deeply appreciative to the Ford Foundation for its support to the roundtable meetings, the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its support to the roundtable documentation which led to this report and for its core support to NCOFF, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for its support to dissemination activities. The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of our funding sources.

The mission of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) is to improve the life chances and well-being of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the positive involvement of fathers. NCOFF aims to achieve this mission by promoting the conduct and dissemination of sound basic, applied, and policy research that examines critically issues in the seven Core Learnings and related work and that can contribute to social change. Developed in the spirit of the Philadelphia Children's Network (PCN) motto, "Help the children. Fix the system.", NCOFF seeks to increase and enrich the possibilities for children, particularly those most vulnerable to hardship and poverty. NCOFF shares with PCN the premise that children need loving, nurturing families that families need support in providing nurturance; and that an essential component of support includes increasing the ability of fathers, mothers, and other adults to contribute to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

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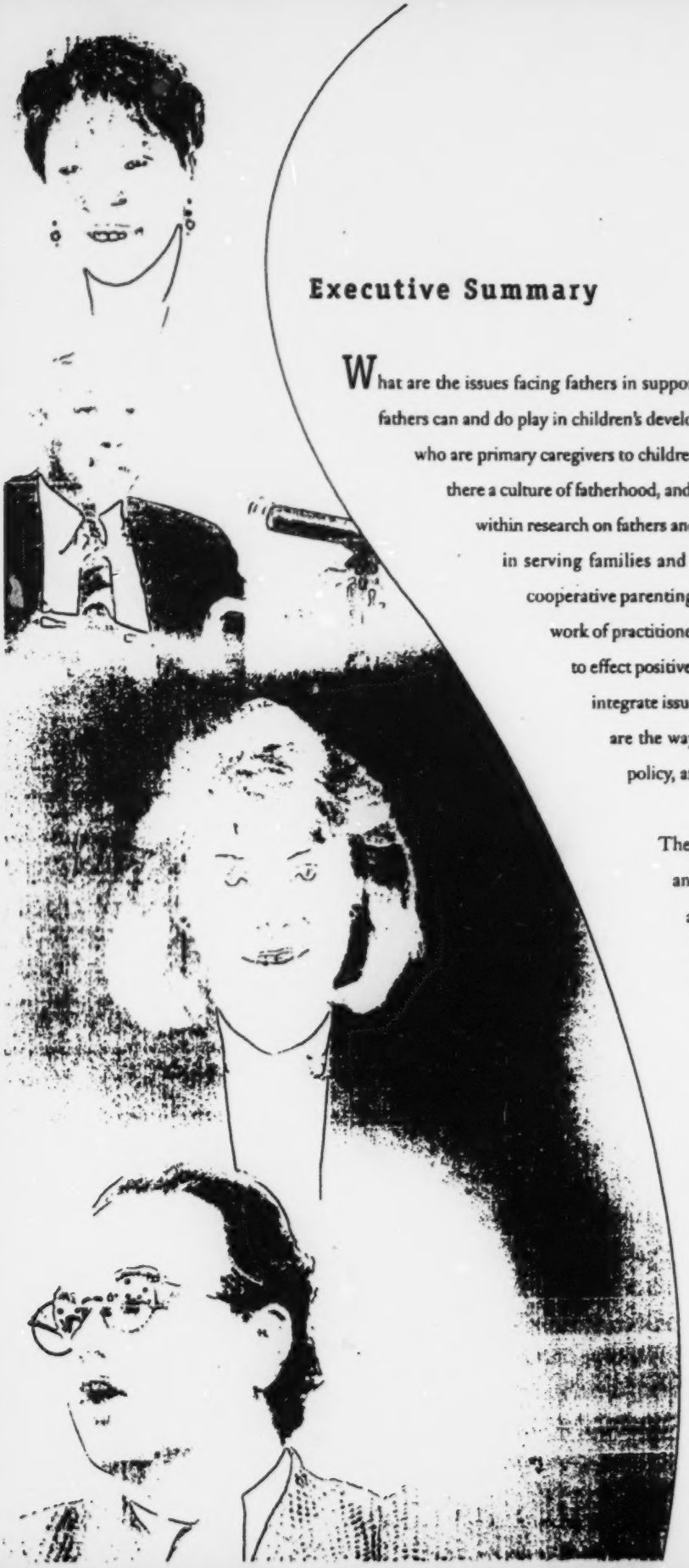

Executive Summary

What are the issues facing fathers in supporting their children and families? What are the roles that fathers can and do play in children's development and family efficacy? What are the needs of mothers who are primary caregivers to children? In what ways does father presence or absence matter? Is there a culture of fatherhood, and how are issues of culture, diversity, and difference examined within research on fathers and families? What are the strengths and the needs of practice in serving families and encouraging positive father involvement and effective cooperative parenting? How can fathers and families research contribute to the work of practitioners, programs, and communities? What policies are needed to effect positive change for children and families, and how do these policies integrate issues related to fathers? In discussing fathers and families, what are the ways in which salient issues cut across research, practice, and policy, and what are the possibilities for shared efforts?

These questions are posed within each of the Core Learnings and were among those discussed at the 1995-1997 Fathers and Families Roundtable Series, sponsored by the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF). The Roundtable series consisted of meetings designed to connect researchers from different disciplines, along with practitioners and policymakers, in small, focused forums that stimulate critical analyses—from developing new conceptualizations of work on fathers and families, particularly around issues of race, culture, poverty, and gender, to the creation and implementation of action agendas, to the study of fathers' relationships with mothers, cooperative and shared parenting, and child and family welfare.

From top to bottom: Vivian Gadsden, Joseph Jones Rebecca Maynard, Lawrence Aber

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Diane Scott-Jones
Diana Slaughter-Defoe

The purpose of the Roundtable Series was to promote issues around fathers and families through multiple forms of inquiry, encourage research that informs and is informed by practice and policy, and create opportunities for cross-disciplinary and cross-domain collaborations. The discussions at the 1995-1997 Roundtable Series included approximately 30 to 35 researchers, practitioners, and policymakers at federal and state levels. At every meeting, roundtable participants examined current and emerging issues, policy implications, and new directions for practice, research, and public policy. Three papers were used as focal areas of discussion for each roundtable: an NCOFF-commissioned literature review and two papers specially developed or revised for the roundtable.

This report describes the richness of the roundtable discussions and the extent to which participants struggled to untangle their complex topics while reflecting the current state of the field. It highlights the major themes that cut across the seven meetings with particular focus on their implications for practice, research, and policy. Because the issues affecting fathers and families are interrelated, the distinctions among several of the Core Learnings—particularly fathers care, father presence matters, co-parenting, and role transitions—occasionally became blurred. Overall, however, participants emphasized three points. First, fatherhood takes diverse forms and can be viewed through many lenses, and current practice, research, and policy do not always accommodate this diversity. Second, fathers and fatherhood are complex and influenced by many factors. And third, many fundamental, unresolved questions still exist about what it means to be a good father.

This report is intended to spark further debate among people concerned with fatherhood and family issues. It synthesizes the major viewpoints and experiences expressed by roundtable participants, most of which are related to the broad points outlined above. The first section presents key themes and implications that emerged across the seven roundtables. The second section summarizes participants' recommendations for new directions in practice, research, and public policy. Selected findings from the commissioned literature reviews are presented throughout the report to provide additional context.

Seven Core Learnings

Fathers care—even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.

Father presence matters—in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.

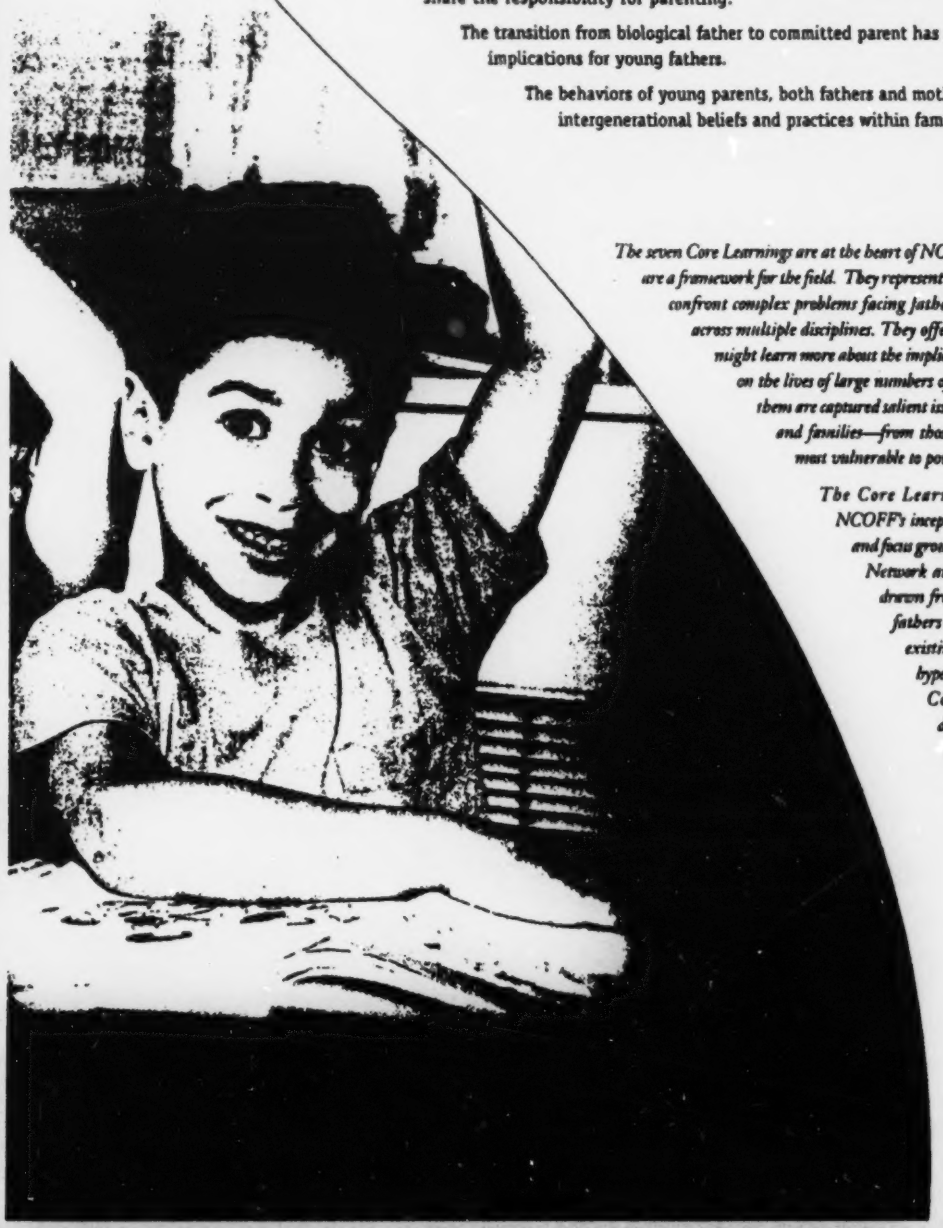
Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.

Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers"—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.

A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting.

The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant development implications for young fathers.

The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.



The seven Core Learnings are at the heart of NCOFF's agenda for research, practice, and policy and are a framework for the field. They represent the knowledge and experience of practitioners who confront complex problems facing fathers and families and are consistent with research across multiple disciplines. They offer an important lens through which policymakers might learn more about the implications and impact of legislation and policy decisions on the lives of large numbers of fathers, mothers, children, and families. Within them are captured salient issues experienced and felt deeply by a range of fathers and families—from those who are financially secure to those who are the most vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

The Core Learnings were identified immediately prior to NCOFF's inception by frontline practitioners in a series of survey and focus group activities conducted by the Philadelphia Children's Network and NCOFF. Formulated first as seven hypotheses drawn from practitioners' experiences in programs serving fathers and families, each hypothesis was tested against existing published research and policy studies. As each hypothesis was borne out in the literature, it became a Core Learning. A library of information was developed for each. The resultant seven libraries now constitute the NCOFF FatherLit Research Database and include over 7,000 citations, annotations, and abstracts of research, available in written, diskette, CD, and electronic form.

Foreword

The NCOFF Fathers and Families Roundtable Series

The decline in the quality of life for children coupled with sweeping changes in policy and support to poor families within the past two years heighten the need for coherent and responsive efforts. The seven Core Learnings are the framework through which the field can examine these issues and deepen our understanding of the needs and problems facing fathers and families. Distilled from the experiences of practitioners and found to be resonant with critical research analyses, the Core Learnings provide the context for the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) to conduct and support interdisciplinary, cross-domain activities, build the knowledge base on fathers and families, and promote a forward-thinking agenda within and across research, practice, and policy. Future initiatives around father involvement, we believe, must secure the well-being of children over the short- and long-term and must address the increasing challenges with which growing numbers of children and their families grapple. The NCOFF Fathers and Families Roundtable Series was designed to explore these challenges and work toward positive change. This report shares with you the issues and recommendations of the Roundtable participants.

Future initiatives around father involvement, we believe, ***must secure the well-being of children over the short- and long-term.***

As a university-based research center, NCOFF is committed to understanding a range of theoretical and practical issues in the field, i.e., to study whether, how, and with what effects fathers do and can contribute to children's well-being, support of mothers, and family functioning. We are encouraged by the interest in practice-focused efforts, continued commitment to basic and policy research on families, and increasing public attention to father involvement and family efficacy. The Fathers and Families Roundtable Series is one important step toward building the field. It will be enriched only by well-planned, vigorously pursued agendas that support family efficacy, children's well-being, and positive father involvement and by our continued and collaborative investment in individuals, communities, and organizations committed to effecting positive change.

Vivian L. Gadsden
Director

Background and Context

In Fall 1995, the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) established the Fathers and Families Roundtable Series, designed to examine and address critical research, practice, and policy issues embedded in the Core Learnings and in the work on fathers and families. The first seven roundtables were held between July 1995 and June 1997. Each roundtable focused on a different Core Learning. This report is a synthesis of the major themes that cut across the seven meetings, with particular focus on their implications for practice, research, and policy.

The purpose of the Roundtable Series is to promote issues around fathers and families through multiple forms of inquiry, encourage research that informs and is informed by practice and policy, and create opportunities for cross-disciplinary and cross-domain collaborations. The meetings are designed to connect researchers from a variety of disciplines, along with practitioners and policymakers, in small, focused forums that stimulate analyses. Issues discussed range from new conceptualizations of work on fathers and families, particularly around issues of race, culture, poverty, and gender, to creation and implementation of action agendas, to the study of fathers' relationships with mothers, cooperative and shared parenting, and child and family welfare.

The discussions at the 1995-1997 Roundtable Series included approximately 30 to 35 researchers, practitioners, and policymakers at federal and state levels. (See Appendix A for a list of participants and Appendix B for a description of the framework and methodology for the Roundtable Series.) At every meeting, roundtable participants examined current and emerging issues, policy implications, and new directions for practice, research, and public policy. Three papers were used as focal areas of discussion for each roundtable: an NCOFF-commissioned literature review and two papers specially developed or revised for the roundtable.

This report describes the richness of the discussions at the 1995-1997 Roundtable Series and the extent to which participants struggled to untangle their complex topics while reflecting the current state of the field. Fatherhood is still emerging in various disciplines as a focus of study, and multidisciplinary discussions of research, policy, and practice related to fathers are relatively rare.

Because the issues affecting fathers and families are interrelated, the distinctions among several of the Core Learnings—particularly fathers care, father presence matters, co-parenting, and role transitions—occasionally became blurred. Overall, however, participants emphasized three points. First, fatherhood takes diverse forms and can be viewed through many lenses, and current practice, research, and policy do not always accommodate this diversity. Second, fathers and fatherhood are complex and influenced by many factors. And third, many fundamental, unresolved questions still exist about what it means to be a good father.

NCOFF seeks to extend the discussion around father involvement and family development to a broader audience. This report is intended to spark further debate among people concerned with fatherhood and family issues. It synthesizes the major viewpoints and experiences expressed by roundtable participants. The first section of the report highlights key themes and implications that emerged across the seven roundtables. The second section summarizes participants' recommendations for new directions in practice, research, and public policy. Selected findings from the commissioned literature reviews are presented throughout the report to provide additional context.

Core Learnings

1. *Fathers care — even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways.*

2. *Father presence matters — in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.*

3. *Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.*

4. *Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers" — men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.*

5. *A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting.*

6. *The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.*

7. *The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.*

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Neil Tift

Themes within Roundtable Discussions

Theme 1: Fathers can play many roles in their children's lives.

While fathers are often thought of exclusively in terms of the provider role, no single definition of fatherhood captures the diversity of roles and contexts in which fathers care for their children. Roundtable participants explored three dimensions of father involvement: economic roles, emotional roles, and activity-based roles. Gaps in our knowledge about fathers' roles are largely due to the past approaches of research, which tended to focus on father absence rather than presence and limited its scope to two-parent, Euro-American, middle-income families. The emphasis has also been on measuring the amount of paternal caregiving rather than the kind of caregiving. Despite limits to our knowledge of fathers' care, it is clear that fathers' roles are not static and can change because of shifts within the family (such as changes in the relationship with the mother) and changes in societal beliefs.

Theme 2: Numerous factors determine fathers' roles.

The kind and amount of father involvement is shaped by cultural beliefs and practices, societal characteristics, policies, and family relationships. Roundtable participants focused on how these factors act as barriers to involvement. For instance, the belief that mothers should care for children while men focus on activities outside the home discourages men from becoming active caregivers. Fathers' relationships to the outside world also affect their behavior within the home. For example, racism and unemployment both can deter a father's involvement with his children by affecting his self-esteem.

Both children and fathers benefit *when fathers are highly involved in parenting.*

Theme 3: There are no clear explanations of how fathers matter.

Although research indicates that, in most cases, both children and fathers benefit when fathers are highly involved in parenting, research does not clarify which aspects of father presence—financial contributions, emotional support, physical presence, or involvement in activities—relate to specific child outcomes such as academic achievement, psychosocial development, or behavior. This is in part due to the fact that the direction of influence among the many factors associated with father involvement is not clear.

Theme 4: One size doesn't fit all, whether "it" is a research project, a policy designed to encourage or require father involvement, or an approach to working with fathers and their children.

Because of the diversity among fathers and families, and the current lack of knowledge about the details of father involvement, programs must be able to accommodate diversity and uncertainty. Policies must allow latitude in

responding to the needs of particular fathers, families, and communities. Participants recommended conducting research that clarifies the diverse contexts in which children and families interact and designing programs that can respond to the needs of a variety of fathers and families.

Theme 5: Practice should inform research, and research should inform practice. Practitioners' day-to-day experience in the field is crucial to researchers who want to understand the real issues affecting fathers and families. At the same time, research can help practitioners envision better responses to people or issues. Despite the potential usefulness of a partnership between research and practice, participants agree that this partnership is generally lacking. Participants suggested ways to strengthen the link between research and practice. For instance, researchers should test the hypotheses used by policymakers, since policies shape programs and affect practice.

Recommended Directions for Research

- Develop a multidimensional framework that examines how context shapes father involvement and that explores how men make the transition to fatherhood
- Consider issues such as cultural practices, beliefs, and values that determine fathers' roles; race and ethnicity, which affect fathers' experiences with society and the economy; income, which affects self-esteem; fathers' age, which affects experiences, identities, resources, and attitudes; family context and structure, which affect the supports available to fathers and fathers' access to their children; employment status, which determines income and often affects fathers' perceived ability to serve as role models for their children; and public policies and the formal and informal systems that develop in response to those policies

Aisha Ray

- Raise questions about how concepts of masculinity develop and how changing views of masculinity influence fathers' relationships with their children; what factors sustain father involvement over time; the changing dynamic of relationships between fathers and their families following a divorce or disintegration of a family; the impact of long-term financial and social shifts on family formation and father involvement, and the interactions of men's transitions over the life-course particularly in relationship to the workplace
- Using new approaches to gather information, including multiple perspectives; videography as a way to capture "feelings, faces, and voices"; ethnography as a tool for cultural understanding; and multiple levels of study
- Recognizing assumptions that affect research design, findings, and interpretations, particularly assumptions that:
  - Mothers are gatekeepers to father involvement
  - Father involvement represents a loss of personal freedom for men
  - Father involvement is a discretionary act, while mother involvement is expected from the birth of the child

- Females bear responsibility for pregnancy
- Clarifying cause, effect, and implications for practice and policy
- Developing new approaches to dissemination that develop discussions in terms of the diversity of fathering and father care; that present research in ways that are useful and user-friendly to a variety of stakeholders; that target education, health, and human service practitioners; and that ensure that information flows in several directions and using multiple formats for presentations

Recommended Directions for Practice, Practitioners, and Programs

- Help fathers become more self-sufficient, better able to support their children, and more aware of the rights and responsibilities involved in fathering
- Hold reasonable expectations for changing fathers' behavior, especially when the fathers have little education and face limited or nonexistent employment opportunities
- Rely less on punitive strategies for increasing father involvement
- Help young men and women clarify the meaning of fatherhood and fathering, teach them how to communicate with and support each other, and educate them about the importance of creating legitimate birth records for their children
- Provide community outreach to stimulate father involvement
- Cultivate community collaboration, which can improve responses to local conditions
- Involve a greater variety of service systems in paternity establishment efforts, including hospitals, prenatal clinics, and community health centers
- Develop a variety of outreach materials to be disseminated to schools to support education about fatherhood

Recommended Directions for Policy

- Create systems that can respond to the changing reality of family structures, including policies that acknowledge and support the informal contributions that fathers make to their children, and facilitate mediated child custody arrangements for never-married, separating couples
- Broaden the concept of paternity and create policies to help fathers become self-sufficient, better able to support their children, and more aware of the benefits, rights, and responsibilities involved in fathering
- Rely less on punitive strategies for promoting father involvement
- Consider the interests of both men and women to ensure that men's concerns are included in the discussion of family well-being
- Encourage custody arrangements and other approaches that establish and enforce the rights of low-income, unmarried fathers to be involved in their children's lives beyond providing financial support
- Consider both short-term and long-term effects of policies
- Create opportunities for fathers to link with multiple services and supports to encourage creative ways of reaching and supporting fathers

What Do We Know About Fathers, and What Does it Mean? Cross-Cutting Themes and Implications

The big question for people who work with fathers, children, and families is, "What difference does a father make in the lives of his children?" According to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, this question is difficult to answer for many reasons.

We know that fathers can play many different roles in their children's lives, and that these roles can change over time. Many factors—within their relationships, communities, cultural groups, and the larger society—shape men's views of fatherhood. The way these factors shape men's views often constrains fathers' opportunities to care for and support their children.

Current research fails to reflect the diversity of fathers and families or the multiple issues affecting fathers' roles in their children's lives. This makes it difficult to draw reliable conclusions about how fathers matter to their children's well-being.

Successful efforts to understand and support fathers and to improve child well-being will require programs and policies to do a better job of recognizing, describing, and responding to the diverse contexts in which fathers interact with their children, roundtable participants concluded. This will require stronger links than currently exist among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

As Roundtable participants explored these issues, five cross-cutting themes emerged:

1. Fathers can play many different roles in their children's lives;
2. Numerous factors determine fathers' roles;
3. There are no clear explanations of how fathers matter;
4. One size doesn't fit all, whether "it" is a research project, a policy designed to encourage or require father involvement, or an approach to working with fathers and their children; and
5. Practice should inform research, and research should inform practice.

Theme 1:
Fathers Can Play Many Roles in Their Children's Lives

There are many different kinds of fathers and families. No single definition of fatherhood captures the diversity of roles and contexts in which fathers care for their children.

Traditionally, most research on fatherhood focused exclusively on what happens when fathers are absent and not on what happens when fathers are present. In recent decades, studies have moved beyond a focus on family structure and father absence to an emphasis on father behavior and attitudes. But these studies are largely based on two-parent, Euro-American, middle-income families. The complex ways in which fathers of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds view their roles are not described in most research, thus limiting the relevance of their findings to a single type of family.

In addition, most studies have investigated the quantity—rather than the quality—of father care. Researchers have measured distinct, basic activities such as changing diapers and the amount of time a father spends doing the activity, instead of documenting the process of caregiving, the emotional expressions of fatherhood, and the nature of interactions between fathers and children.

The complex ways in which fathers of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds view their roles are not described in most research, thus limiting the relevance of their findings to a single type of family.

Despite these shortcomings in the formal knowledge base, people who work closely with fathers know that fathers' roles are influenced by the dynamic nature of fatherhood and by key dimensions of father involvement.

Views of Fatherhood Are Dynamic

The roles that fathers can play in their children's lives change over time. A father's role can alter over his lifetime in response to the changing needs of his children, changes in his relationship with the mother(s) of his children, and changes in his own self-identity. In the words of Joseph Pleck of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "How paternal involvement is embedded in fathers' own adult and life course development is still largely unexplored terrain."

The definition of fatherhood also is subject to changes in cultural beliefs about men and women and expectations for their behavior. Fathers today are more likely than their earlier counterparts to experience changes in their commitment to non-economic parenting roles as a result of new societal expectations for men and women and increasing diversity in family arrangements.

The age at which society considers parenthood appropriate—and the age at which it becomes biologically possible—also has changed over time. Adolescent girls are becoming physically ready for childbearing at earlier ages, while women and men in the general population are much more likely than ever before to postpone parenthood until the end of their childbearing years. "We have created adolescent childbearing as a problem, so we need a societal solution," Diane Scott-Jones of Temple University emphasized. Instead, "We have created a scapegoat generation."

Sheila Tucker

Fathers also have experienced changes in the availability of role models for parenting. For example, research on youth employment that compared the experiences of young, African American men in the early 1990s with those of African American men in the 1920s and 1930s found that in previous generations, older men served as mentors. Today, those social relationships have disappeared, and many young African American men turn to their peer group to help them through transitions to adulthood, including fatherhood. Practitioners today need information on how to address these changing social relationships and help young fathers make the transition to responsible fatherhood and adulthood.

Fathers' roles in establishing emotional connections with their children *have been secondary, and mothers' roles as economic providers have been discounted.*

In addition, the rules regulating social institutions, such as marriage, affect men's transitions to fatherhood and father involvement. In some states, for example, women can become legally married without a parent's consent at younger ages than men. This creates a "systemic gap" that may affect men's choices about family roles, whether it means becoming a father without marriage or being involved with an adolescent.

Father Involvement Has Several Important Dimensions

Roundtable participants explored three major dimensions of father involvement: economic roles, emotional roles, and activity-based roles. Each role category represents an important aspect of father involvement. The economic and activity-based roles, however, have received more attention in the literature and more emphasis in traditional cultural beliefs and practices.

Fathers as Providers

One of the most prevalent and enduring roles defined for fathers is that of breadwinner. The prevailing cultural myth defines fathers as economic providers and mothers as nurturers. The result: Fathers' roles in establishing emotional connections with their children have been secondary, and mothers' roles as economic providers have been discounted.

The notion of fathers as primary or sole providers is not universal across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. For example, African American women have always had to be involved in the labor force in order to support their families. And mothers of all types have entered the labor force in increasing numbers in response to a changing economy and new societal views on the role of women. These trends also have altered fathers' roles as providers across racial, ethnic, and class lines.

Fathers as Nurturers

The development and expression of emotional connections between fathers and their children and the role of fathers in their children's emotional development have received relatively little study. The inattention of many researchers to these issues reflects traditional, mainstream views of men's and women's roles in public and private life, which emphasize economic contributions or limited care activities for fathers.

Father-Child Activities

Play and other father-child activities are important dimensions of parenting, because they build the basis for trusting, supportive relationships. In fact, some research suggests that these activities are the most common components of father-child relationships among both married and noncustodial fathers.

Fathers' views about the relative importance of the different roles they can play—and their ability to express these roles—are shaped by the factors described within Theme 2.

Theme 2: Numerous Factors Determine Fathers' Roles

Father involvement does not occur in a vacuum. The extent to which men engage in each of the possible roles and relationships they can have with their children is determined by many cultural and contextual factors. Some are systemic and rooted in institutional structures and practices. Others stem from fathers' relationships with their children's mothers and from the roles assumed by extended family members and other adults.

Key factors that affect father involvement include cultural beliefs and practices, racism, poverty and lack of employment opportunities, punitive or rigid legal policies, and family context and relationships.

Cultural Beliefs and Practices

The extent of fathers' roles in their children's lives, and the form that father involvement takes, are shaped in part by cultural beliefs and practices about men, women, children, and parenting. For example, several studies reviewed for the roundtables found that:

- Among fathers living in married families, parenting expectations are divided by gender; mothers are expected to care for children whether or not they are employed, while men focus on activities outside the home
- Shared parenting is atypical
- Fathers' share of responsibility for children is lower than mothers'

Specific cultural values also affect parenting and father involvement. For example, because Native American cultures value non-interference in other people's lives, many Native American fathers are not highly involved in their children's schooling. Similarly, the value placed on interdependence and familial relationships in Asian culture reminds researchers that parenting is both a group and an individual activity—and that children's responses to parenting are based in part on an expanded sense of self that is influenced by cultural norms.

Children's responses to parenting are based in part on an expanded sense ***of self that is influenced by cultural norms.***

Racism

To understand why young men choose or reject certain roles or behaviors that affect their children, researchers and practitioners must first understand "how [young men] see the wider society and how the wider society sees them," noted Elijah Anderson of the University of Pennsylvania. Racism is a powerful social force in the lives of minority families that is rarely acknowledged in studies of fathers and families. Racial discrimination marks the experiences of individuals, families, and communities; it may affect roles and relationships among men, women, and children. It also perpetuates negative images of men who belong to minority groups and significantly limits their employment opportunities.

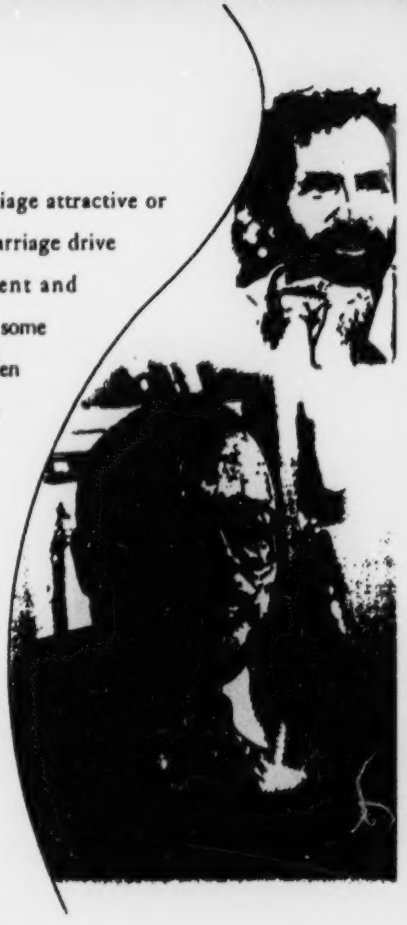
These and other consequences of racism profoundly affect the development of minority men's self-identities

and attitudes about the future, influencing decisions that in turn affect their relationships with their children. Practitioners at the roundtables described the wall of isolation, alienation, and bitterness that racism creates and emphasized that the success of programs for fathers rests on whether fathers believe that they are gaining anything useful from the program, given the economic realities confronting them.

Unemployment and Poverty

Joblessness and poverty can influence fathers' roles in their children's lives in a variety of ways. By making it very difficult for a father to support his children, male unemployment and underemployment often strain a father's relationship with his children's mother(s). Unemployment also erodes a father's self-esteem and desire to interact or serve as a role model. Parents' Fair Share, a program that serves noncustodial parents in Los Angeles, finds that unemployed fathers often have low self-esteem and avoid their children. Fathers become more involved with their children after receiving job training and finding work.

Research demonstrates clear links among employment, earnings, and family formation. Resident and/or married fathers have higher earnings than their divorced or nonresident counterparts on average. Family formation influences father involvement according to research which shows that nonresident fathers who seek close relationships with their children find it harder than resident fathers to establish rules and responsibilities for fathering and to establish and maintain contact with their children. It is not clear, however, whether employment and income make fatherhood and marriage attractive or whether fatherhood and marriage drive men to secure employment and increased earnings. Perhaps some other interaction is at work: Men who are more likely to have children and get married may also be more likely to be employed for reasons that have not yet been identified.



From top to bottom: James Levine, Elijah Anderson

The answers to these questions could help practitioners and policymakers target their resources more effectively. Current research and policymaking usually assume that marriage is better for children than other approaches to family formation, but the more critical issue may be fathers employment status.

Legal and Public Assistance Policies

A number of public policies have been enacted to provide legal protections and financial support to women and children in the event of divorce, single motherhood, or abuse. While important, these policies can have adverse effects on father involvement. They negatively affect fathers' roles directly, by limiting access to children, and indirectly, by discouraging formal paternity establishment and family formation.

Roundtable participants were especially concerned about policies related to child custody and child support, including paternity establishment policies, and about the disincentives to father involvement created by eligibility policies for public assistance programs.

Child Custody, Child Support, and Paternity Establishment Policies

Current approaches to child custody and child support negatively affect fathers—especially poor and ethnic minority fathers—in several important ways. A commissioned literature review by Elaine Sorensen and Mark Turner of The Urban Institute found that a sizable minority of noncustodial fathers are poor and unable to support their children financially, although many want to be involved with their children. Other conclusions from the paper include:

- The child support enforcement system is inefficient, inflexible, and punitive and counteracts the value structure within some low-income and minority communities
- Child support guidelines do not accommodate noncustodial fathers who have a limited ability to make financial contributions
- Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) creates a disincentive for noncustodial fathers to use the formal child support system because it retains most of the support payments as reimbursement for welfare costs; mothers and children receive only the first $50 per month
- Child support programs usually focus exclusively on a father's financial obligations and ignore child custody and visitation issues

Participants noted that the child support system only recently has established a connection between compliance with support orders and a father's rights to joint custody or visitation, because of a long-standing fear that fathers might use the access issue to bargain for reduced support payments.

A separate paper by Michael D. Resnick, Esther Wattenberg, and Rose Brewer examined legally based approaches to family formation and found that the process of formal child support enforcement and court systems did not support the goal of increasing paternity establishment. The authors found that young, unmarried parents do not necessarily view marriage as the route to "legitimizing" their children but do value legal links between fathers and children, such as having the father's name on the birth certificate.

The paper identified three barriers that limit paternity establishment: (1) confusion about how to establish paternity; (2) insufficient advising of parents about their rights and obligations; and (3) the maze of laws, internal operating arrangements, and complicated legal and administrative relationships between the AFDC system and the service agencies that interact with parents.

Roundtable participants noted that some unwed fathers are afraid to establish paternity formally because they fear the judicial system, and some unwed mothers refuse to identify fathers because they fear that the father could be excessively or inappropriately involved in decisions concerning the child. Moreover, some mothers believe that they can obtain greater financial support from fathers through informal arrangements.

The inflexibility, inefficiency, and sheer complexity of paternity establishment and child support enforcement procedures hinder the involvement of noncustodial fathers. As a result, underground systems for paternity

acknowledgment and child support that circumvent the legal procedures have developed as alternatives. These informal systems allow fathers and mothers to negotiate arrangements that enable fathers to remain involved with their children and to provide for them as best they can within economic constraints.

Public Assistance Policies

Public assistance programs also affect the roles that low-income fathers play in their children's lives in several ways. For example:

- Welfare policies generally do not help noncustodial fathers find the work they need in order to pay child support
- Some public housing programs raise the rent of families that report the presence of a resident husband with income, which discourages some parents from becoming legally married and encourages less stable "visiting partner relationships"

The political context in which policymakers discuss father involvement policies also affects public assistance programs and practices. Roundtable participants noted that issues of personal responsibility and its consequences have become a political platform; as a result, child support issues have risen to the top of the political agenda. But the focus on responsibility encourages a punitive, enforcement-oriented approach to father involvement. Welfare reform strategies that include strong paternity establishment and child support enforcement requirements may continue to encounter the barriers outlined above, participants warned.

Family Context and Relationships

Family context and fathers' relationships with the other adults in their children's lives affect the nature and extent of paternal involvement. Relationships between fathers and mothers are particularly important, because the mothers can facilitate or impede father involvement—especially for noncustodial fathers. Extended families, step-families, and close family friends who share childrearing also affect the support available to biological fathers and the roles that fathers can play.

Relationships Between Fathers and Mothers

A literature review by Terry Arendell of Colby College for the Co-Parenting Roundtable found that mothers are the primary caregivers for children and that mothers in all types of formal and informal family arrangements play a pivotal role in facilitating father involvement. But Roundtable participants cautioned against casting mothers as gatekeepers of father involvement, because that view reinforces the stereotypes that mothers are primarily responsible for the home and caregiving while father involvement with children is discretionary.

Elaine Sorensen

Conflicts between men and the mothers of their children can hinder father involvement, especially when those problems prevent men from gaining access to their children. For example, fathers' inability or unwillingness to help support their children financially can have a negative impact on their relationships with mothers. Mothers in turn may restrict access to the children.

Differences in the ways in which policies and programs treat mothers and fathers reinforce the impact that parent relations have on fathers' access to their children. Many

Deborah Johnson

divorced and unwed fathers believe that child custody, child support enforcement, and other formal systems are biased in favor of single mothers and find it difficult to reach what they consider fair custody and support agreements. As a result, fathers with these perceptions are likely to resist formal systems.

Family Contexts

The contexts in which men live influence their experience of fatherhood. Cohabitation, single-parent families, and step-family arrangements are becoming common—and each influences the ways in which men relate to their children and their children's mothers.

In families in which both parents work, other adults—e.g., grandmothers, other relatives, or nannies—participate in parenting. In many cultures, these extended family members and nonrelated friends create a support structure for parents that can improve the well-being of children. At the same time, these networks of involved adults can change the roles of biological parents. The presence of multiple step-family arrangements also can isolate parents from their children if parents succumb to the stress of competing economic and social demands from various relationships.

Roundtable participants disagreed on the importance of family formation as a framework for father involvement. Research data indicate that fathers and mothers are most likely to establish close, enduring relationships within formal marriage and that fathers who are not married to their children's mothers are less involved with their children over time. But the data do not show that marriage is essential for father involvement, some participants noted.

While channeling public funds to campaigns that promote marriage might indirectly result in greater father involvement, some participants argued that this is not a practical solution in a society in which divorce and nonmarriage are prevalent. Furthermore, cross-cultural research reveals the positive impact that extended families can have on children, especially when their parents must cope with stresses such as poverty.

Theme 3: There Are No Clear Answers to the Question, "How Do Fathers Matter?"

The picture that emerges from NCOFF's literature reviews, papers, and roundtable discussions is that of a complex web of factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. These interrelated issues affect the nature and extent of father involvement.

Most of the critical associations among factors have been described in Themes 1 and 2, including the links between father involvement and: (1) family formation; (2) family relationships; (3) the quality of fathers' relationships with their children's mothers; (4) public policies related to child custody, child support, and paternity establishment; (5) racism, unemployment, poverty, self-identity, and the ability to provide for children financially; and (6) culture, race, ethnicity, and men's views of their roles as fathers.

Although research indicates that, in most cases, both children and fathers benefit when fathers are highly involved in parenting, research does not clarify which aspects of father presence relate to specific child outcomes.

Some of these relationships, such as the link between employment and family formation, have received more attention than others. But relatively few studies of fathers adequately account for the variety of contextual factors and interactions that might explain fathers' behavior and actions toward their children.

Although research indicates that, in most cases, both children and fathers benefit when fathers are highly involved in parenting, research does not clarify which aspects of father presence—financial contributions, emotional support, physical presence, or involvement in activities—relate to specific child outcomes such as academic achievement, psychosocial development, or behavior.

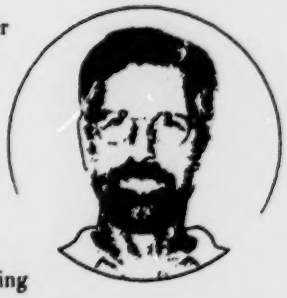
Challenges Posed by Complexity

People who work in programs, conduct studies, or develop policies that relate to fathers and families face several challenges in their efforts to find appropriate, accurate, and reliable ways to assess father involvement and its impact on children's well-being.

Cause and Effect are Hard to Establish

The direction of influence among the many factors associated with father involvement is not clear. Although studies have shown links between different characteristics related to father involvement—for example, between income and marriage—research does not tell us whether one characteristic causes the other, and, if so, which is the cause and which is the effect. In addition, research rarely includes enough information about other contextual factors that might interact with the characteristics in question.

For example, early studies on father absence confounded race and class by using inappropriate comparison groups and by failing to disentangle the effects of poverty from race. Findings on the impact of father absence on children's gender-identity development become questionable in the face of changing cultural views on healthy male and female characteristics. And the effects of poverty on many single-parent families—including poor housing, health risks, and increased parental stress—confuse the relationship between family structure and child outcomes. In studies that identify links between troubled children and divorce, it is often unclear whether children become troubled as a result of divorce or whether troubled children contribute to marital discord and divorce.



Scott Coltrane

Differing parenting styles of mothers and fathers *may help infants develop competence across social settings.*

Selected Findings on Fathers and Child Outcomes

A literature review conducted by Deborah Johnson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the Father Presence Matters Roundtable identified three major themes: (1) the effect of father absence on intellectual development or academic achievement, (2) gender-specific issues associated with children's psychosexual identity and development, and (3) male behavioral adjustment and aggression. Studies generally do not assess or adjust for such variables as race, culture, or socioeconomic class. Several studies compare the effects of father absence for boys and girls. Their findings suggest that:

- Girls' academic achievement is less likely than that of boys to be associated with fathers' residence with the family; girls appear to suffer "emotional destabilization" but not impaired academic performance when fathers do not reside in the home;

- Impaired contact with fathers negatively affects boys' school success, social prowess, and masculine identity;
- Contact and involvement with fathers reduces aggression in boys;
- Continued contact with nonresident fathers who are loving, supportive, and nurturing improves girls' emotional well-being; and
- Pre-divorce conflict may have a greater impact on child outcomes than changes in father contact and residence.

Louise Silverstein of Yeshiva University cites studies which show that active involvement by responsible, non-abusive fathers results in higher cognitive competence among their children. Likewise, Michael Lamb of the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development cites recent studies which have found that variations in fathers' behavior affect the extent to which infants socialize with strangers. In addition, Lamb's own research suggests that the differing parenting styles of mothers and fathers may help infants develop competence across social settings.

The failure of research to establish clear cause and effect poses dilemmas for practitioners and policymakers trying to use research findings to improve programs and policies.

Different Issues Affecting Fathers and Children Can Hold Conflicting Implications for Policy and Practice

Competing interests are at stake in many of the issues around father involvement, forcing practitioners and policymakers to balance conflicting objectives for fathers and children. For example, child support policies seek to protect vulnerable women and children by enforcing fathers' financial obligations to their children, but these same policies may be experienced as punitive by fathers and may hinder formal paternity acknowledgment and involvement. Child custody policies establish visitation arrangements designed to facilitate involvement of non-custodial fathers, but fathers' access to their children may be contingent upon financial contributions.

Many father-related programs advocate lower support payments for fathers who have more visitation rights, arguing that the higher level of father involvement should be recognized as an increased contribution to the child's well-being. In the words of Robert Lerman of The Urban Institute, "If the father is taking care of the child...why isn't it appropriate that that be taken into account [in financial awards]?...Why does the payment always have to go through the other parent?" Others argued that some fathers simply use their involvement with their children as an excuse to pay less to support them. This issue is complicated by the fact that many of the costs of supporting a child are fixed; even if a child spends more time visiting his or her father, the custodial mother's costs for supporting the child do not diminish.

Theme 4: One Size Doesn't Fit All

The diversity among fathers and families, and the current lack of knowledge about the details of father involvement, have several implications for programs and policies. Programs must be able to accommodate diversity and uncertainty, and practitioners must be flexible and adaptable. Policies must allow latitude in responding to the needs of particular fathers, families, and communities. One strategy, system, or rule cannot fit all circumstances.

Roundtable participants suggested two ways to address these implications: (1) by conducting research that clarifies

the diverse contexts in which fathers and children interact and (2) by designing programs that can respond to a variety of fathers and families.

Programs must be able to accommodate diversity and uncertainty, ***and practitioners must be flexible and adaptable.***

Research Should Clarify Diverse Contexts for Fathering

The traditional framework for research on fathers—with mothers as the source of information and with one type of family representing all—must give way to multidimensional research methods. Participants recommended the following strategies:

- Expand variables to include race, ethnicity, cultural practices and beliefs, income, and employment; tease out cultural processes and values from socioeconomic factors
- Include a variety of fathers, families, and communities in study samples and compare father roles and child outcomes at the community level as well as the family level
- Gather data from diverse sources, including fathers and the practitioners who work with them
- Gather data in ways that capture fathers' experiences in their own words and describe the cultural and community contexts in which they are raising their children—for example, through focus groups, ethnography, and videography
- Train researchers to recognize their own assumptions about what it means to be a father, because a researcher's understanding of ethnic or cultural variables influences the way in which he or she interacts with fathers and the questions to which he or she attends
- Examine the work of and collaborate with researchers of varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds
- Use terms when describing behaviors and roles that are explicit and sensitive to differences in cultural meaning
- Consider the sources of definitions and interpretations of culture

Programs must be able to accommodate diversity and uncertainty, and practitioners must be flexible and adaptable.

Programs Should Respond to a Variety of Fathers and Families

Participants suggested that policymakers and practitioners develop and implement programs that:

- Help fathers understand the breadth of possibilities for father involvement and emphasize men's strengths, rather than their weaknesses
- Implement informal approaches that facilitate father involvement (such as mediation of flexible child support arrangements) to respond effectively to local and individual family circumstances
- Involve community stakeholders in developing, assessing, and improving programs so that efforts accommodate local conditions
- Include targeted approaches to meeting specific family and community needs as well as universal approaches to addressing systemic barriers such as unemployment

Theme 5: Practice Should Inform Research, and Research Should Inform Practice

Practitioners develop and implement programs based on their experiences in working with fathers and children. They understand the realities faced by fathers today and the constraints that affect fathers' roles in the lives of their children. This perspective on father involvement—

Ed Pitt

grounded in reality and tested by experience—is crucial to researchers who want to understand the real issues affecting fathers and families.

Even the most sophisticated, multidimensional approaches to research will not resolve conflicting objectives or the need for negotiating approaches to societal goals regarding children and families.

At the same time, research is important to practitioners when it helps them envision better responses to people or to issues. For example, research on parent education can help practitioners define the skills that men need in order to negotiate family relationships.

Similarly, research on support systems can identify the types of services and supports that fathers are most likely to use. Research also can add credibility to frontline advocacy efforts to make policies more responsive to people's needs.

Despite the potential synergy between research, practice, and policymaking, roundtable participants agreed that research has not empowered practice to support real needs. One reason is the historically narrow focus of most studies. Another reason is that research findings are rarely interpreted for and disseminated to a nonacademic audience.

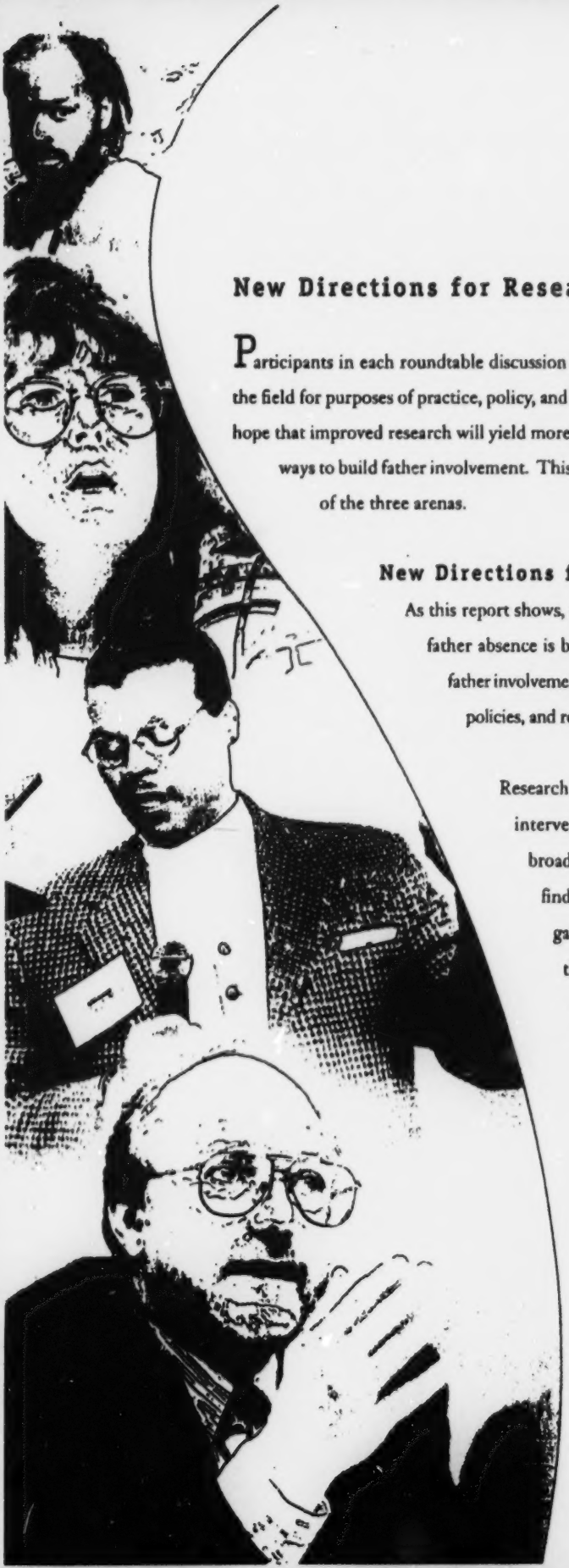
Roundtable participants suggested several ways to strengthen the link between research and practice. In particular, researchers should:

- Examine the way in which programs envision "helping" fathers—how help is defined, provided, used, interpreted, and measured
- Test the hypotheses used by policymakers, since policies shape programs and affect practice
- Seek practitioners' perspectives
- Share findings on issues affecting fathers and families with a wider audience, perhaps through short briefing papers, documents describing the impact of public policies on father involvement, and campaigns to inform the media about the complexity of key issues

Although researchers and practitioners have much to gain from one another, roundtable participants cautioned that research cannot provide certainty in such a complex field. Even the most sophisticated, multidimensional approaches to research will not resolve conflicting objectives or the need for negotiating approaches to societal goals regarding children and families.

Suggested Ways to Include Practitioners' Perspectives in Research

- During early stages of study design, ask practitioners to help formulate questions and develop strategies for collecting data
- Interview practitioners; tap their knowledge about the families and communities with whom they work
- Involve practitioners in the analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of findings to help place the findings in context and identify implications
- Evaluate programs in ways that elicit knowledge about innovations and best practices



New Directions for Research, Practice, and Policy

Participants in each roundtable discussion explored the implications of their findings about the current state of the field for purposes of practice, policy, and research. Many of their recommendations focus on research, with the hope that improved research will yield more useful information for practitioners and policymakers about effective ways to build father involvement. This section summarizes the new directions participants suggested for each of the three arenas.

New Directions for Research

As this report shows, simplistic approaches in which "more father involvement is good and father absence is bad" do not fit well in the real world. All stakeholders in the field of father involvement face the task of developing a multidimensional framework for programs, policies, and research that moves beyond stereotypical models of parenthood.

Research can play a vital role in developing a framework that recognizes the intervening processes involved in father involvement. But as researchers broaden their scope to address father care more thoroughly—and to make findings more useful to practitioners and policymakers—techniques for gathering information must change. Researchers must learn to recognize the impact of their own assumptions and biases on research design and outcomes; do a better job of clarifying causes and effects and framing findings in terms of implications for practice and policy; and develop new avenues of dissemination.

Developing a Multidimensional Framework for Research

NCOFF's Roundtable discussions highlighted two broad dimensions of an improved research framework: (1) context and (2) time frames. Context shapes father involvement in fundamental ways, and time frames—for fathers' personal development, role transitions, and family involvement and for research itself—are an important piece of the complex web that research must disentangle.

From top to bottom: Antonio McDaniel, Velura Peterson, Kirk Harris, Jeff Evans

Contextual Variables

Because a focus on isolated variables results in isolated findings, good research on fathers should acknowledge and incorporate a range of contextual factors. One way to do this is by adopting an "ecological framework" that considers the importance of multiple variables. Key contextual variables include:

- Cultural practices, beliefs, and values that shape fathers' roles
- Race and ethnicity, which affect fathers' experiences with the dominant culture and economy, and the impact of racism on fathers' socioeconomic status and self-identity
- Income, which affects self-esteem, the extent to which fathers can be economic providers, and the kinds of activities in which fathers can participate with their children
- Age of fathers, which affects experiences, identities, resources, and attitudes
- Family context and structure, which affect the supports available to fathers and fathers' access to their children and which may differ across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status
- Employment status, which determines income and often affects fathers' perceived ability to serve as role models for their children
- Public policies and the formal and informal systems that develop in response to those policies, which create incentives and disincentives for parenting

Time Frames

Any number of changes during the course of a man's life can influence his role in his children's lives. Societal norms regarding men's roles can shift over time. Changes in the economy can alter men's employment and earnings opportunities and their ability to support their children financially. Age and experience affect men's self-identity and views about fatherhood. Changes in family structure, such as divorce and remarriage, affect fathers' opportunities to interact with their children. Children themselves change as they move from infancy to adolescence, presenting different issues and needs to which fathers must respond.

Research on father presence should use a more complex framework that places adults in a "life course," Roundtable participants agreed. This perspective would reveal the effects on parenting roles and children of (1) each stage of human development and (2) changes in the larger society and economy. Participants recommended that future research examine:

- How concepts of masculinity develop and how changing views of masculinity influence fathers' relationships with their children
- What factors sustain father involvement over time
- The changing dynamics of relationships between fathers and their families following a divorce or disintegration of a family
- The impact of long-term economic and social shifts on family formation and father involvement
- The interaction of men's transitions over the life course, especially interactions between transitions to fatherhood and to the workplace

Using New Approaches to Gathering Information

Barbara Cleveland

Most existing research on father presence is cross-sectional and relies on evaluation or survey data that typically come from mothers. Research that uses multiple methods to collect and assess information on father presence could do a better job of informing theory, policy, and practice.

Research should use both quantitative and qualitative approaches that allow systematic, documented study of key issues. Useful approaches include large surveys; focus groups or community meetings; case studies and ethnographies at the individual, family, and community levels; and intervention-based studies that merge quantitative experimental data with qualitative findings from ethnographies or focus groups.

Combined, these methods would (1) elicit input from more stakeholders, including children and fathers; (2) obtain a broader base of knowledge; (3) inform a more complex understanding of the factors that affect father presence; and (4) clarify the connections among research, theory, and practice.

Gathering Information from Multiple Perspectives

Research based on interviews with fathers and their children as well as focus groups and surveys of agencies can blend first-hand impressions about actual conditions, deeper discussion and reflection on issues, and statistical data at the community level. Research that incorporates the views of informants helps bridge the gap between researchers and families and makes it possible to see what specific changes might mean in specific contexts. Similarly, people who operate programs can provide researchers with valuable insights on how procedures and policies encourage, discourage, and interfere with men's role transitions and father involvement.

Videography as a Way to Capture "Feelings, Faces, and Voices"

Videotaped interviews give informants "feelings, faces, and voices" that have greater impact than printed words or statistics, according to participants. Videotaped conversations also may portray more accurately than self-reporting techniques now fathers interact with their families; people are less able to control how they are perceived during videotaped interactions than through self-administered questionnaires. On the other hand, several participants noted that the camera can misrepresent circumstances by failing to capture activities beyond the range of the lens or by failing to record the mood or atmosphere of the videotaped interaction.

Ethnography as a Tool for Cultural Understanding

Ethnographic research puts a human face on social conditions and enables researchers to focus on variability among individuals, rather than on categories of people. As a research methodology, ethnography is a useful tool to uncover and investigate differences across cultural, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. It elicits nuanced, contextual, and qualitative information that can inform policymaking and enrich statistical research.

"[A] new form of cultural racism is spreading and. . .down-to-earth ethnographic portrayals of the very human targets of this ugly tide of hate are among the chief intellectual weapons at our disposal for responding to this moral panic."

—Mercer Sullivan
Rutgers University

Ethnography is a tool for revealing and understanding the "shadow values" that emerge in poor communities when residents lack the employment opportunities they need to live up to mainstream expectations. For example, ethnographic interviews can help explain why some fathers struggle to maintain contact with their children when they cannot make the financial contributions that constitute manhood in their culture.

Ethnography is a tool for revealing and understanding the "shadow values" that emerge in poor communities *when residents lack the employment opportunities they need to live up to mainstream expectations.*

Multiple Levels of Study

The level at which researchers study father presence—individual, family, community, or societal—shapes and defines the type of conclusions that can be drawn from their data. Because the focus of existing research on fathering is primarily at the individual level, its findings can not explain sufficiently the contextual factors that influence father involvement or the direction of causality.

Researchers should consider strategies that reveal variability at the community level. For example, is it important for a child to live in a community with a relatively high level of father involvement, or is it more important for a child to have a highly involved father?

Researchers also should consider the middle ground between broad conceptual issues and individual variables. For example, Randal Day of Washington State University raised the question, "How would we measure something that happens not as an individual would see it, but something that could only happen in terms of a family?"

Small, in-depth, qualitative studies and large, national, quantitative research both have a role in creating a paradigm for understanding fathers' roles. Qualitative research on local and regional samples improves the depth of knowledge and reveals important variation within groups. Large-scale, longitudinal surveys that measure broad variables produce "typical" findings and indicate the pervasiveness of the themes identified by smaller studies. A coherent picture of fatherhood has not yet emerged in part because researchers have failed to connect data from large-scale national surveys with information from small longitudinal studies.

Recognizing Assumptions That Affect Research Design, Findings, and Interpretation

In order to help policy and practice, researchers must be able to identify and articulate clearly the assumptions upon which their conclusions are based. Researchers also must distinguish between political, ideological, and scientific notions of father presence.

From top to bottom:
Vonnie McLoyd, Phillip Bowman

Roundtable participants identified several key assumptions made by researchers, including the beliefs that:

- Mothers are gatekeepers to father involvement because they are the primary caretaker from the point of conception; as a result, according to Wil Jordan's *Role Transitions: A Review of the Literature*, "fathers often risk feelings of being intruders in their own families." Several participants questioned this assumption because it presumes that father involvement is outside the father's control.
- Father involvement represents a loss of personal freedom for men. The loss of freedom is a critical issue for fathers. However, the concept of freedom may be especially important to fathers in high-crime communities in which young men often do not expect to live beyond 20 or 25 years. Men who expect to die before their children mature may resist the loss of freedom associated with parenthood more than their counterparts with longer life expectancies.
- Father involvement is a discretionary act, while mothers are expected to be involved. More realistically, the roles that men play as fathers are defined by both mothers and fathers, Roundtable participants said. However, researchers cannot avoid the fact that some fathers—especially those who are divorced—are constrained by legal custody agreements and do not have as much discretion as married fathers.
- Females bear responsibility for pregnancy, an assumption that reflects a double standard for mothers and fathers, and for adult men involved in pregnancies of adolescent women. As Diane Scott-Jones of Temple University noted, popular theories speculate that these women allow themselves to become pregnant in order to improve their self-esteem, a view that assumes the teenage woman "follow[s] a rational decisionmaking process and then overpower[s] a helpless adult male." Because many researchers assume the fathers in these cases are blameless, they fail to examine the father's role in the pregnancy.

"I suggest that perhaps we have inappropriate notions of freedom and a double standard for men and women."

—Diane Scott-Jones
Temple University

Clarifying Cause, Effect, and Implications for Practice and Policy

Researchers realize that contextual and other factors are related to fathers' roles, but the causal relationships are complex and unclear. Does poverty cause or result from adolescent childbearing? Does a father's presence at the birth of his child result in his being more involved with—and attached to—his infant, or are certain types of fathers simply more likely to attend their children's births?

Researchers must examine the complex processes involved in transitions to parenthood and analyze them statistically to clarify cause and effect. Without understanding causality, it is difficult to interpret research findings.

Developing New Approaches to Dissemination

Research is not useful to practitioners or other family advocates unless it is accessible—easy to obtain and easy to understand. Participants suggested that researchers use the following strategies to make their knowledge more accessible to practitioners, policymakers, and families:

- Focus on spreading knowledge and insights about what researchers know—and about what they do not yet know but think they ought to know
- Frame discussions in terms of the diversity of fathering and father care; avoid framing discussions around a good father/bad father dichotomy
- Present research in ways that are useful and user-friendly to a variety of stakeholders
- Concentrate on shattering myths about fathers and promoting actions based on solid research
- Target education, health, and human service practitioners in particular because they have an immediate impact on young people; accomplish this by working through schools, Head Start programs, and other institutions that shape how children think about fatherhood
- Ensure that information flows in several directions; knowledge gained from broad studies should inform practice, information on current issues and best practices gained from program evaluations and front-line practitioners should guide research, and knowledge from both research and practice should inform policymaking
- Use multiple formats including panel discussions at professional conferences, coordination with religious institutions, and contact with local governments and county commissions in addition to traditional reports

New Directions for Practice

Several general principles of best practice emerged from the Roundtable discussions. Some were stated explicitly, and others were implicit in discussions about barriers to father involvement. Participants also made practice-related recommendations for specific types of programs, including those involved in child custody, child support, paternity establishment, and assisting men with the transition to fatherhood.

General Principles for Practitioners

Roundtable participants recommended that practitioners should:

- Help fathers become more self-sufficient, better able to support their children, and more aware of the rights and responsibilities involved in fathering
- Hold reasonable expectations for changing fathers' behavior, especially when the fathers have little education and face limited or nonexistent employment opportunities
- Rely less on punitive strategies for increasing father involvement
- Assume that every father cares about his children but needs certain supports to improve the quality of his involvement
- Help young men and women clarify the meaning of fatherhood and fathering and teach them how to communicate with and support each other
- Provide community outreach to stimulate father involvement
- Cultivate community collaboration, which can improve responses to local conditions

Participants also suggested that programs for families make father involvement "almost a condition of treatment" in order to encourage mothers to include fathers in parenting. Therapist Marla Isaacs found that if she could convince a father to visit her program at least once—and persuade the child's mother to agree to the father's participation—then overall father involvement improved.

Program-Specific Recommendations

The systemic barriers to father involvement raised by child support, child custody, and paternity establishment policies and programs generated several recommendations for practitioners. Practitioners involved in paternity establishment should:

- Explore creative "hooks" to entice fathers to establish paternity—for example, by combining efforts with court probation officers and hospital personnel
- Involve a greater variety of service systems in paternity establishment efforts, including hospitals, prenatal clinics, and community health centers
- Develop a variety of outreach materials to be disseminated to schools to support education about fatherhood
- Educate young parents about the importance of creating legitimate birth records for their children
- Direct paternity education efforts to the parents of young fathers so they will encourage their sons to establish paternity for their own children

Advice for Practitioners Who Help Fathers Make Role Transitions

Readiness for self-discipline appears to be the most fundamental difference between successful and unsuccessful program participants. The most effective teachers and counselors exhibit patience, respect for youth, and skill at responding to youth who test boundaries.

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Role models who have succeeded in reaching a program's goals are vitally important at every stage, to offer advice and reassurance to participating youth.

Cultural differences become especially important when programs ask men to change their behavior in ways that may contradict cultural norms. Programs must provide some structure that helps participants incorporate changes into their previous identities so that the individual's transformation fits comfortably into his environment.

Practitioners in the child support field should explore less formal mechanisms, such as mediation or peer support, to address child support and visitation issues among low-income families. Community-based organizations may offer promising models of informal approaches. These practitioners also should find ways to establish and enforce the visitation rights of low-income, unmarried fathers.

New Directions for Public Policy

The Roundtable meetings yielded some guiding principles and generated discussions—but not necessarily consensus—around several policy dilemmas. Participants agreed that being right in the policy sense may sometimes mean being wrong in practice. Responses to some of the issues affecting fathers and families may translate into good policies but be inappropriate for the target populations; also, solutions may conflict with one another. Policy development in this field is therefore a balancing act among numerous goals and interests.

During the Roundtable discussions, recommendations for new directions in public policy were closely intertwined with recommendations for practitioners, because policymakers' decisions create the systems within which practitioners work with fathers and families. Therefore, some of the new directions for policymakers described in this section mirror those described for practice.

Roundtable participants recommended the following guiding principles and general approaches for policymakers interested in encouraging and supporting father involvement:

- Create systems that can respond to the changing reality of family structures, including policies that acknowledge and support the informal contributions that fathers make to their children, and facilitate mediated child custody arrangements for never-married separating couples
- Create policies to help fathers become self-sufficient, better able to support their children, and more aware of the benefits, rights, and responsibilities involved in fathering
- Rely less on punitive strategies for promoting father involvement
- Assume that every father cares about his children, but needs certain supports to improve the quality of his involvement
- Consider the interests of both men and women to ensure that men's concerns are included in the discussion of family well-being
- Encourage custody arrangements and other approaches that establish and enforce the rights of low-income, unmarried fathers to be involved in their children's lives beyond providing financial support

- Consider both short-term and long-term effects of policies
- Create opportunities for fathers to link with multiple services and supports to encourage creative ways of reaching and supporting fathers
- Broaden the concept of paternity establishment to include parenting establishment to support positive father involvement beyond financial contributions

Policy Dilemmas and Suggestions

Efforts that seek both to protect women and children and to encourage noncustodial father involvement face inherent tensions. Likewise, an ongoing dilemma for social policy development as a whole is the need for efficiency and equity—which call for universal policies equally applied across target populations—and effectiveness, which often calls for flexible policies that can be tailored in practice to different circumstances. Roundtable participants raised several specific challenges for policymakers seeking to balance these competing pressures and goals.

Protecting Vulnerable Children While Removing Barriers to Fathering

A number of recommendations related to father involvement require that policymakers seek a better balance between the goals of protecting vulnerable children and encouraging father involvement. As described in the discussion of Theme 3, child support and paternity establishment policies are designed to enforce the financial aspects of fathering but in the process can hinder other kinds of father involvement.

Most Roundtable participants favored separating child support and paternity policies but acknowledged that there are positive aspects to the link when policies involve teaching fathers to embrace the long-term commitment of fatherhood. In the short term, emphasizing the link between paternity establishment and child support may scare some fathers away from paternity establishment—but in the long term may encourage more fathers to have sustained involvement with their children.

Participants disagreed about the fairness of basing child support orders on potential earnings. While this practice offers an enforcement tool that can prevent middle-class fathers from deliberately lowering their incomes in order to qualify for lower support payments, some participants argued that support awards based on projected income are not realistic for poor and low-income fathers and will prevent these fathers from ever joining the formal child support system. The system must find a reasonable balance between approaches for fathers who refuse to work to avoid paying child support and approaches for fathers who want to support their children but have little or no employment.

Specific recommendations for less punitive and financially-driven approaches to father involvement include:

- Authorize alternative personnel to enforce child support orders, as the use of sheriffs or law enforcement officers triggers fear among many fathers
- Promote shared custody agreements among low-income parents by extending eligibility for AFDC or other support programs to parents with joint custody

Balancing Formal and Informal Systems for Paternity Establishment and Child Support

Just as fathers may find employment in informal or underground labor markets, some fathers acknowledge paternity and provide child support through underground systems. Informal systems for paternity establishment and child support have emerged partly as a result of a system that emphasizes the enforcement of protections over the encouragement of father involvement. They are also a response to the inflexibility of the system.

Fathers may be discouraged from establishing paternity by the negative attitudes toward fathers of some practitioners in the formal system. Formal rules governing a father's liability for arrearages, and the system's practice of delivering most of a father's payments to the state welfare system rather than to his children, also present psychological barriers that make fathers prefer informal support systems. And informal support systems may simply allow low-income fathers greater flexibility in meeting their financial obligations. Existing policy approaches fail to recognize the competition between the formal systems and informal arrangements.

In particular, decisionmakers should consider (1) whether there are real benefits from a formal system for establishing paternity; (2) whether the formal system can be made more attractive to fathers—for example, by funneling support payments directly to children rather than using the money to defray state welfare costs, or by creating self-support reserves; (3) whether the informal system needs to acquire more legitimacy in order to be more effective; and (4) what tradeoffs exist for participation in each type of system.

Targeted Versus Universal Policies

Participants agreed that policies and programs should both (1) provide specific, targeted responses that build individual abilities and motivations and (2) address broader needs by serving a universal population and by stimulating aggregate demand for labor to increase employment across sectors.

Policies that take a universal approach help practitioners move away from categorical strategies that focus on people's pathologies. By addressing the needs and strengths of multiple populations, universal approaches also create links between people who are struggling and those who are succeeding within society—a crucial effort in times of "social dismemberment, increasing isolation, and increasing segregation." At the same time, universal policies must not fail to identify and serve the groups that most need help.

Targeted and universal approaches are not necessarily at odds. Strong, targeted programs offer opportunities to develop successful practices that can be applied to broader efforts. Noted Mercer Sullivan of Rutgers University: "I would distinguish between the value of universalism in large policy goals and the implementation issues of getting those policies to work in specific places" by forming partnerships with local programs that can target specific populations.

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National Center on Fathers and Families
University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education
3700 Walnut Street
Box 93
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216

215.573.5500
215.573.5508 fax
www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu
e-mail: mailbox@ncoff.gse.upenn.edu
Mandalist: HS05124@handsnet.org
Director: Vivian Gadsden, Ph.D.

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